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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000650

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR POL-J. MARKSTADT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA - OPPOSITION PARTIES IN MARCH MEETING
WITH AMBASSADOR

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter for reason 1.5 (b).

11. (C) Begin Summary: During a March 10 meeting with numerous opposition political party leaders, Ambassador implored the group to do their utmost to conduct fair and credible elections in April, to eschew violence, and not to condemn and compromise the process before it is started. He cautioned that West Africa was already suffering an overdose of turmoil; a downward slide in Nigeria would only compound the region's troubles. The opposition party leaders complained that INEC was simply an instrumentality of the governing People's Democratic Party. (The PDP was invited to the meeting but did not show.) They denigrated INEC's elections preparation, particularly its handling of voter's registration. The politicians claimed that INEC was working to ensure that President Obasanjo was reelected. Although avowing peaceful intentions, the party leaders warned of unrest should the President be returned through an electoral process that, for them, has the appearance of an increasingly stacked deck. End Summary.

INEC Cannot be Trusted

12. (SBU) Due to a gale of criticism by political parties about the electoral process, the Ambassador called a March 10 meeting of all political parties to hear their views and to let them know USG expectations regarding the electoral process. Although invited, the ruling PDP did not attend.

13. (SBU) Ambassador Jeter emphasized that Nigeria was entering an historic period, not only for itself but the entire sub-region. With Cote d'Ivoire teetering on the brink of a possible civil war and Liberia an area of chronic turmoil, West Africa was awash in instability, he stressed. While Nigeria is the giant and leader in West Africa, a poor election here would finish the region in the eyes of the world; therefore these elections were not only important to Nigeria but to West Africa and indeed the entire African continent. Unfortunately, the Ambassador stated, things were not proceeding smoothly. The political violence being committed by all sides was a huge problem; moreover, INEC's poor performance also was a major concern. Furthermore, too many politicians had made the leap from criticism of INEC'S poor performance to accusing it of rigging. Politicians might gain points among their partisans with the accusations but they were also laying the groundwork to have the elections seen as null and void even before they were held. This was dangerous, the Ambassador said. Not only could it delegitimize the process and ultimately the elections, it could foment post-election unrest and violence.

14. (SBU) The Ambassador called on all the parties to work toward free, fair and credible elections. After making this appeal, Ambassador Jeter and the USAID Director then provided a brief overview of USG electoral assistance.

Voter's Registration - A Chimera

15. (SBU) After thanking the Ambassador for hosting the meeting, ANPP National Chairman Don Etiebet stated that he "shared" the Ambassador's concerns. Then, in effect, he did what the Ambassador cautioned against.

Etiebet claimed the elections would not be "credible, free or fair." He declared that INEC was the agent of the government and PDP. The Obasanjo Administration, he claimed, was determined to win by any means despite its patent unpopularity. The government was petrified by a free and fair election because it would lose handsomely; therefore, the Government and PDP would resort to election trickery, violence and intimidation to mask their shortcomings. Unfortunately, the very agencies--the Police and State Security Service--that could prevent foul play, are as deeply in the PDP pocket as INEC, Etiebet contended.

16. (SBU) Etiebet went on to claim that ANPP campaigning has been thwarted by PDP governors. The governors claim to be the "commander-in-chief" of their state with the army, police and SSS at their disposal. They wield power but not popularity. If they are reelected by a fraudulent process, the people will denounce it. Etiebet asserted the elections in 1999 were "child's play" compared to the next four weeks. While bereft of specific recommendations, he asked that, in addition to election monitoring, the international community become more involved now or else be faced with doing "peace keeping" later.

17. (SBU) Etiebet and a few other opposition leaders encouraged the USG to voice our concerns about the election publicly. While the government would chastise the United States for interfering in Nigeria's internal affairs, statements of international concern could have a positive effect and would be supported across the political spectrum.

18. (SBU) Regarding security for the electoral process, Ambassador Jeter mentioned he had recently met Police Service Commission Chairman Okeke. At that meeting Okeke stated his willingness to meet political party officials to discuss the role of the police and to underscore the police's neutrality. (Comment: That meeting has since taken place under INEC's auspices. The Police Services Commission plans to field its own "monitors" to observe and regulate police behavior during the elections. End comment.)

19. (SBU) The UNPP Chairman launched a broadside at INEC, claiming it had fumbled voters registration. He stated that INEC claims of having posted the voters list in most states were fabricated, and that lists were published in only a small fraction of local government areas. Even there, INEC had problems. The UNPP Chairman cited an example of people in a local government in Borno State checking the list only to find that the roster belonged to an area in Plateau State. He claimed to have searched for a published list in his ward but could not find one. With one month to the election, he lamented the fact that, as a national official of a political party, he was unsure if he had been officially registered. The irony of this statement was not lost on the meeting's other participants who echoed similar concerns.

110. (SBU) The NDP Chairman announced that his party had sued INEC for non-compliance with the Electoral Act. He claimed that INEC was required to publish the voters list prior to announcing the election date; moreover, the list should have been published at least sixty days prior to the election. To date, only three states had completed and published their lists, he claimed. Because of the failure of INEC to timely post the list, holding elections in April would be illegal. This was the issue on which the NDP had taken INEC to court

111. (SBU) The APGA representative observed that the PDP rarely attended INEC meeting with other political parties. The PDP's absence led to the suspicion that INEC was the guarantor of the PDP's interest; thus, the PDP did not have to attend the meetings. (Comment: In a subsequent meeting with the Ambassador, the INEC Chairman refuted this allegation, claiming that INEC calls frequent meetings with political parties, but most fail to attend. We believe the Chairman is telling the truth. End comment.) He also questioned the transparency of the selection process of local polling agents by INEC, complaining that opposition parties had no input into the selection system or eligibility criteria. The Resident INEC Commissioner in a state unilaterally selected the staff; in turn, that Commission was appointed by the

President. There was no check against the Commissioner hiring a PDP loyalist. The selection process was too subject to arbitrariness to produce a good crop of polling officials. The ANPP Chairman interjected that the real skullduggery would be at the local level, particularly in remote areas. What happens outside the spotlight, in the small hamlets across the country, will determine the election; deploying observers to Lagos, Abuja and Kano, in his opinion, will not give one an accurate account.

112. (SBU) The Peoples Salvation Party Chairman accused INEC of even changing parties' candidate list. For reasons clear only to INEC, he said, names announced by the Commission as the final party candidates were not always those submitted by, in many instances, the parties. The UNPP Chairman warned that INEC planned to use polling stations on election day different than the venues used for voters registration. This would confuse voters and allow for rigging at the new, unknown sites. To prevent this, he demanded that INEC quickly publish a list of polling stations and their locations. Thereafter, any station not on the list, would be illegal and ballots allegedly cast should not be recognized. (Comment: INEC has performed poorly in many areas. In all fairness, however, INEC has repeatedly announced that the sites used for voters registration will be the same locations used on election day. End Comment.)

113. (SBU) The Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ) Chairman focused on the lack of voter education as a major flaw. He stated this task should be the joint responsibility of INEC and the parties. Elaborating, he claimed that the parties could not develop their election day deployment strategies because INEC had not divulged the polling stations. He feared a repeat of 1999 where many polling stations in his state were designated at the last minute. He also said the political parties needed to be better educated about the role of the police, presiding polling officers and other poll officials at the voting stations. This knowledge was needed so that political party agents could be informed observers but also avoid running afoul of the police or polling agents. (In the past, political party agents were often falsely arrested and detained until after the voting.) The MDJ Chieftain commented that the failure of INEC to inform parties about the process for filing complaints and objections on election day also was a major flaw.

114. (SBU) The MDJ Chairman further warned that declaration of results could be a problem. In Nigeria, the media has a vital role to play but major media houses were being financially influenced by the Government. If the media prematurely declared a result, this would be taken as a fait accompli by the people; the other parties would be hard pressed to overcome the perception created, even if inaccurate. However, neither INEC nor the Ministry of Information had informed the parties about the process for disseminating the results, the Chairman declared.

115. (SBU) The Justice Party Chairman chimed in that vote tabulation was fertile ground for fraud. He suggested the political parties should be allowed to monitor vote tabulation at every level from the local polling station through the ward to the local government headquarters, to the state and then the national compilation. "If the political parties are kept in the dark, that will be bad," he proclaimed.

16 (SBU) Ambassador commented that the USG was doing what it could to enhance the integrity and speed of the tabulation process. He mentioned IRI's training of polling agents, the provision of tamper evident envelopes and ballot box seals by IFES for the safe transport of ballots and tabulations and the provision of a satellite phone system to call in results from approximately 150 of Nigeria's most isolated areas. He also mentioned the IRI and NDI observer teams, and the significant USG investment made in local monitoring groups.

117. (SBU) The Head of the New Democrats (ND) complained that the campaign playing field was massively skewed. Mass media was in the hands of government, and PDP campaign activities were being aired liberally. In contrast, the PDP was paying the

media houses to black-out other campaigns; opposition parties received only minimal coverage, which gave the false impression of inactivity and weakness. He claimed that the parties needed funding to counter the PDP tactics. However, the PRP representative counseled that the opposition parties should not be quick in their indictment of the ruling PDP. "If some of us were in power, we would be doing the same thing," he admitted. Instead of complaining about the PDP's media advantages, he suggested the other parties explore creative, low cost ways to get their message out. He asserted that TV and newspapers reached only a small percentage of the population in any event, and suggested the parties focus more on radio and poster production.

VIOLENCE

18. (SBU) The National Secretary of Nigerian Action Party (NAP) said he was frightened by the prospect of more political violence. Violence was widespread and, in many instances, the perpetrators were well-known. However, these notorious criminals were allowed to roam about with impunity. Because of the violence and INEC's logistical shortfalls, he claimed the election seemed artificial and imposed on the Nigerian public, with a predetermined outcome seemingly at hand. The government controlled both the mechanics and the economics of the running an election and with that advantage, it sought to unduly guide the outcome.

19. (SBU) The Chairman and Presidential candidate for the African Renaissance Party argued that the election was beyond repair. He called for an interim government with the sole mandate to prepare for elections within six months. (Comment: At this meeting, few people endorsed his idea. However, at a late March meeting of opposition parties, 15 backed the interim government idea. This is symptomatic of growing unease and disaffection with the elections. End Comment.)

20. (SBU) Pointing to the high level of violence, Ambassador Jeter asked if "the prize (winning the election) was worth the cost?" He encouraged the parties to endorse the Code of Conduct. He reminded them that they all needed to behave with tolerance and understanding. Election rigging by anyone was inexcusable. However, the parties needed to recognize that INEC started late and lacked resources; its management of this massive logistical affair would be less than ideal. They should not expect perfection but they should work to make the process credible, albeit awkwardly wrought. He added that this election was also laying the groundwork for a more orderly process in the future; precedents were being established that would not have to be debated or litigated in 2007. In essence, what was taking place now was part of Nigeria's transition to democracy.

21. (SBU) While the attempt to computerize voters registration was causing heartburn now, it would pay dividends in 2007 and beyond, the Ambassador said. Unfortunately, the computerization effort started late and that had been a source of many problems in the process. Also, the decision to allow over 30 political parties complicated logistics and threw off the electoral schedule because the decision came late in the sequence of electoral events. However, it opened up the political space. In future elections, both voters and prospective office-holders would have a wider choice regarding where to place their allegiance. The Ambassador said that there had been lots of litigation, and ultimately that litigation would pay off. (Comment: By March 31, all parties, except the NDP and the largest two, the PDP and ANPP, had signed the Code of Conduct. PDP and ANPP have said they endorsed the Code but they were feuding over which party should sign first. End Comment.)

22. (SBU) In concluding the meeting, Ambassador Jeter mentioned that he would suggest to INEC Chairman that INEC convene a meeting of party Chairmen and officials from the GON security agencies to discuss ways to tackle violence and upgrade electoral security. (Note: This was done. End Note)

123. (C) Comment: Turn-out was excellent and the meeting with the parties was most useful. We were able to hear their concerns and grievances while also expressing our expectations regarding the elections. As the election moves even closer, anxiety is mounting and the rhetoric becoming sharper. As we have been doing already, we will use these final days before the elections to continue to rush INEC. While it cannot do much to redress the lapses with voter's registration, many of INEC's previous sins will be forgiven to the extent that the Commission can credibly carry out its duties on election day and tabulate the votes without cries of foul. Additionally, we also plan to meet the Chairman of the ANPP and PDP this week to urge them to sign the Code of Conduct before the National Assembly elections on April 12.
JETER